

### EZRA

#### Lesson 17, Chapter 9 Continued

We have entered a hard hitting, sobering, meddling portion of Ezra and I have some things I need to say today. We're also going to add in an important detour and so we'll still be in chapter 9 after today; there's much that comes together here so I ask you to bear with me and I think it'll be worthwhile.

These final 2 chapters (9 and 10) occurred in a short period of time, just a few months, but the actions that we'll read about had long term agonizing aftershocks. I ended with the thought that this week we'd witness the pain of many Judahites that resulted when decades of wrongs before the Lord are finally admitted and there is a sincere attempt to reverse course and make things right in God's eyes. Unfortunately because the wrongs were so drastic so was the remedy. And to get directly to the point, the predominant wrong that is being addressed in these 2 chapters is marriages that the Lord deems as more than merely unacceptable between Hebrews (Jews from Judah) and foreigners; they are an abomination.

We began setting the stage for this last section of Ezra by first reading part of Malachi (we read chapter 2) where God, through Malachi, severely chastised the priests for leading the people down the wrong path. And the way they did this was by teaching the Jewish laypeople customs and manmade religious traditions (essentially a form of early Judaism) that had absorbed all sorts of pagan thoughts and strange practices over the past few decades of their captivity in Babylon (much like a dry sponge dropped into a mud puddle absorbs the water along with the dirt) instead of teaching them the pure Word of God, which was their calling and job.

Therefore in the midst of doing wrong the Judahites were certain they were doing right and that God would be delighted in their behavior. Why would God's people be so mixed up and not

seem to know right from wrong? Because they didn't know the Torah. They didn't know God's laws and commandments; they only knew customs and ways that their religious leadership had established and said were Godly. And the Lord lays the blame for such an abomination squarely at the feet of the religious leadership telling them that the ultimate cause of this wreckage was that the priests had broken covenant with the God of Israel. The covenant agreement was that the tribe of Levi would be set apart from the rest of Israel for special holiness and special service to God as the keepers and teachers of His divine Word, as well as being the authorized administrators of His justice system. However the Levites broke the covenant, says the Prophet Malachi, in that they failed to teach God's Word (the Torah) and instead taught the people something else. This led to the Jewish men divorcing their Jewish wives of their youth and marrying foreign women, which led to a growing schism between the people and the Lord.

Yehoveh saw their erroneous beliefs and consequent improper behavior as unfaithfulness towards Him even though the people apparently didn't consciously realize what they were doing; especially since it had been sanctioned, promoted and practiced by the Priesthood. This unfaithfulness expressed itself in the Hebrews marrying foreigners who worshipped other gods and Yehoveh says that these unauthorized unions profaned His sanctuary. This turned into a very serious matter that had to be resolved, and Ezra is about to find himself at the center of this ugly controversy.

Here is where I need to say a couple of things: I have regularly suggested that both modern Judaism and mainstream Christianity have behaved very nearly in the same way, and have adopted somewhat the same attitude that we are reading about the priests possessing here in Malachi and Ezra, and they also seem to be oblivious of it. There are so many admirable traits of Judaism and good works of the mainstream Christian institutions that have advanced the Kingdom of God; yet on the other hand Judaism long ago turned from the Bible to the Talmud for spiritual guidance. And many Christian institutions not so very long ago turned from consulting the complete Word of God to using half a Bible, and then in contemporary times has effectively reduced the relevant parts of God's Word to a few favored verses chosen to back-up certain doctrines that each denomination has settled upon. It has created confusion, error, and ignorance of God's truth. How has this situation happened? First it is because saved or not, leaders or followers, we all still have evil inclinations within us and plenty of energy and imagination to make use of them. But mainly we get off course by confusing or intermixing non-Biblical manmade philosophies, practices, beliefs and even political correctness with the true religion of the Bible (exactly the same thing that sent Ezra into a state of depression). At times this comes from a bad habit of willingly adapting our doctrines, baby step by baby step, to be more inclusive and tolerant to the direction society is going in order keep our sanctuaries filled and members happy. Or at times by reshaping the image of God into something that is more attractive to the masses; something that reflects our ever-evolving human aspirations and

reasoning.

To use the language of Malachi 2 verses 8 and 9:

### **Malachi 2:8-9 CJB**

***<sup>8</sup> But you turned away from the path, you caused many to fail in the Torah, you corrupted the covenant of Levi," says ADONAI-Tzva'ot. <sup>9</sup> "Therefore I have in turn made you contemptible and vile before all the people, because you did not keep my ways but were partial in applying the Torah."***

In other words, the Levitical priests cherry picked what parts of God's Word they wanted to teach and apply, and figured the remainder as irrelevant or bothersome. They also showed partiality by making sure that what they required of the people didn't apply so universally that it would upset those who really mattered in supporting the Priesthood.

Look at the results of this long-time trajectory of abandoning God's Word and His commandments for doctrines and customs. What is the fastest growing religion in the world? Judaism? Christianity? No, it's Islam and it's not even close! Christianity has been on a steady decline for decades in the West and is on life support in several parts of Europe. The only measurable growth of Christianity is in 3<sup>rd</sup> world countries and China (of all places). And why is that? God laid it out in Malachi: it's because we, the leadership of Christianity, have failed by not teaching God's true Word and now we are seen as contemptible (and rightly so). Especially the younger generations see no more real meaning or integrity in the Church than they do in the emptiness of the world; so why bother?

On the other hand there are those who enjoy being part of a congregation provided they can bring some worldly ways and ideals with them into the sanctuary, shine them up a bit, give

them a religious aura and sanction, and then feel as though this is pleasing to God. It's a mirage; a very dangerous mirage because we can so easily deceive ourselves into thinking that God is right there with us, cheering us on, but in fact He is not because it is not His ways we seek and do but our own. How do I know this? How can I possibly be so certain? Because that's what the Torah and the Prophets tell us if we'll only have the eyes to see and ears to listen. And it is what Our Lord and Master Yeshua told us would happen towards the end when he cautioned with a harsh statement we've all heard a hundred times, and I wonder if sometimes we've become a little numb to it:

### **Matthew 7:22-23 CJB**

***<sup>22</sup> On that Day, many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord! Didn't we prophesy in your name? Didn't we expel demons in your name? Didn't we perform many miracles in your name?'***

***<sup>23</sup> Then I will tell them to their faces, 'I never knew you! Get away from me, you workers of lawlessness!'***

Almost 5 centuries passed between Malachi's and Yeshua's messages of warning. What a wake up call Malachi and the Book of Ezra ought to be for us all! But so few people will ever hear it or connect it to Christ's warning because the section of the Bible that almost ALL the wake up calls happen in is the Old Testament; the place that many denominations tell their members they must NOT go.

God tells us, again and again, that this is the formula for harmony with Him in any era: 1) Trust Him. 2) Obey Him. 3) Be set apart from the world for Him. The Church does pretty well at #1, especially when it comes to advocating for Christ. We do **not** do so well at #2 because a growing number of Believers don't know God's Word, and because obedience is frowned upon, often labeled as legalism or out dated. And #3? Separation and distinction from the world? That isn't even on the radar. If anything the goal seems to have become the opposite: full integration with the world.

Do you want to know why Islam is growing and Christianity is stagnating? Besides the fact that the Evil One is successfully spreading his lies and cult of death to willing dupes in preparation for the final battle with God that he knows is near, it is because Islam preaches what Christianity was at one time admired and known for: living for a cause greater than ourselves, showing unwavering devotion to our God, and being set apart in our beliefs and behavior so that we intentionally look very different from the unsaved world. Western Christians used to be fine with the idea that much of the world would reject us because of our faith. Now the concern seems to be to become as one with the world as possible so as not to be perceived as out of touch or distinct.

Yes, this is a less than flattering assessment and indeed I'm **not** speaking of all Believers or of all congregations; but I am speaking of both the long-term trend and where the most visible part of Believing institutions have already arrived. And no, none of us are above it all. What is the solution? It has never changed; it is the same solution that Ezra was sent to Judah to put into motion: first recognize that something is dreadfully wrong and next begin a journey of rediscovering God's Word, believing it for what it says, and responding with repentance and reform. The good news is that we are not alone or without resources to accomplish this task. We have the Holy Spirit to teach us, we have the Word of God at our fingertips, and we have the Lord who is always ready to help us get back into harmony with Him when we're ready to confess our rebellion and do it His way.

At its heart, then, the Book of Ezra is really about the 3 R's: return, repentance and reform; not only as individuals but also as communities and congregations. And that is what we need to be about as the time approaches for our Lord to return. But as we're about see the road to reform, the effort to right wrongs, will necessarily include limited options, tough choices, and unintended consequences.

So with that, open your Bibles to Ezra chapter 9.

**READ EZRA CHAPTER 9 all**

The opening words of “after these things” are referring back in a general way to the final thoughts of chapter 8. So chapter 9 begins after Ezra’s group returned, turned over the gold and silver to the Temple authorities, offered their sacrifices and delivered the King’s letter of instruction to the government officials of Beyond the River.

However if we were to jump ahead a bit to Ezra 10:9 we’d read this:

***<sup>9</sup> All the men of Y'hudah and Binyamin assembled in Yerushalayim within the three days. It was the twentieth day of the ninth month. All the people sat in the open place in front of the house of God, trembling because of this matter and because of the heavy rain.***

So the events of chapter 9 were occurring about 4 ½ months after Ezra’s first days back in Judah, and it was now early winter. And what happens is that some of the Jewish leaders come to Ezra with some devastating news. Who exactly these leaders are we don’t know. And what these leaders confess to Ezra puts him into a state of shock. They tell him that it is that not just the lay people but also the priests and the Levites that have refused to keep the foreigners who had moved into Judah during the exile at arms length, but Hebrew men have also married some of those foreign women. And we get a list of 8 foreign peoples (nations) that supplied the wives.

The first thing we need to recollect is that the Torah does NOT prohibit Hebrews from intermarrying with gentiles. In fact we find several cases of it even among the Patriarchs. That said, the Lord didn’t want the Hebrews marrying into certain people groups (or nations) and most of these were targeted because they were residents of Canaan, the people God called wicked and wanted removed from the land in order to give it to His people Israel. And if we look at this list in Ezra 9:1 and compare it with some earlier lists of people groups the Israelites were to avoid fraternizing with we find some familiar names.

**Exodus 34:11-16 CJB**

***<sup>11</sup> Observe what I am ordering you to do today. Here! I am driving out ahead of you the Emori, Kena'ani, Hitti, P'rizi, Hivi and Y'vusi.***

***<sup>12</sup> Be careful not to make a covenant with the people living in the land where you are going, so that they won't become a snare within your own borders.***

***<sup>13</sup> Rather, you are to demolish their altars, smash their standing-stones and cut down their sacred poles;***

***<sup>14</sup> because you are not to bow down to any other god; since ADONAI- whose very name is Jealous- is a jealous God.***

***<sup>15</sup> Do not make a covenant with the people living in the land. It will cause you to go astray after their gods and sacrifice to their gods. Then they will invite you to join them in eating their sacrifices,***

***<sup>16</sup> and you will take their daughters as wives for your sons. Their daughters will prostitute themselves to their own gods and make your sons do the same!***

We get a similar list in Deuteronomy but with an even more specific instruction that bars intermarriage with certain nations.

***CJB Deuteronomy 7:1 "ADONAI your God is going to bring you into the land you will enter in order to take possession of it, and he will expel many nations ahead of you- the Hitti, Girgashi, Emori, Kena'ani, P'rizi, Hivi and Y'vusi, seven nations bigger and stronger than you.***

***<sup>2</sup> When he does this, when ADONAI your God hands them over ahead of you, and you defeat them, you are to destroy them completely! Do not make any covenant with them. Show them no mercy.***

<sup>3</sup> ***Don't intermarry with them- don't give your daughter to his son, and don't take his daughter for your son.***

There are 3 names on the Ezra list of the nations that the Jews had married into that we don't find specific instructions against intermarriage: The Ammonites, Moabites, and the Egyptians. However the reason for the problem with intermarriage with all of these various people groups reduces to a common one: they all worship false gods. So let's first understand that this list is not meant to be the complete list of all the foreigners who the Jews might have married, but rather they are the biggest offenders and in some cases indeed God did directly legislate against them in particular in the Law of Moses.

But in the second place what we have here is direct disobedience to God's clearly stated laws. One of the issues that I'm constantly confronted with since I KNOW without question that the Law of Moses continues to exist and we are expected to obey it, is which laws can or should modern Christians obey and which ones don't we have to. And my answer is the same each time. We must find the principle underlying each law, and then follow the spirit of the law especially when it seems impossible to follow the letter of the law. And that task is not as hard as it may sound, nor is it the sole realm of Theologians to answer the question.

Let's embark on one of our famous (infamous?) detours to discuss this very pertinent issue of obedience to the Law of Moses for modern worshipers of God, because our story of Ezra showed that the ancient worshippers of God of his era struggled with it as well. The most fundamental concept for all of God's worshippers to grasp is that ALL the Law is built upon the 10 Commandments, just as the 10 Commandments are built upon 2 foundational God-principles, one that is found in Deuteronomy 6:5 and the other in Leviticus 19:18.

**Deuteronomy 6:5 CJB <sup>5</sup> and you are to love ADONAI your God with all your heart, all your being and all your resources.**



**Leviticus 19:18 CJB <sup>18</sup> *Don't take vengeance on or bear a grudge against any of your people; rather, love your neighbor as yourself; I am ADONAI.***

How can you know that what I just told you is truth and it isn't just me sermonizing? Because Christ directly said so.

**Matthew 22:36-40 CJB <sup>36</sup> *"Rabbi, which of the mitzvot in the Torah is the most important?"***

**<sup>37</sup> *He told him, "'You are to love ADONAI your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.'***

**<sup>38</sup> *This is the greatest and most important mitzvah.***

**<sup>39</sup> *And a second is similar to it, 'You are to love your neighbor as yourself.'***

**<sup>40</sup> *All of the Torah and the Prophets are dependent on these two mitzvot.***

Essentially, the “Love God and Love your neighbor” commandments are speaking of the guiding principles for all relationships. Love God concerns our relationship with the Lord, and Love your neighbor concerns our relationships with humans. Therefore the 10 Commandments expound upon those 2 principles and give us a broad overview of HOW we show love to God, and HOW we show love to our fellow man (our neighbor).

Once those 10 broad commandments are given (the 10 Commandments), all the rest of the Law (traditionally, 603 more) is essentially case law that gives us many examples of how (or how not) each of the 10 Commandments is to be carried out in practice.

There are two overriding realities concerning how to obey the Law that modern Believers have to contend with, but only one of them which was also pertinent to Jews in Ezra's day. The issue that we have to contend with (that they didn't) is that there is no Temple and Priesthood in our time so none of the ritual law can be followed in our time. Not even modern Orthodox Jews living in Israel can do the Torah ritual law because it still requires a Priesthood and a Temple, neither of which currently exist.

But the struggle that both we and the ancient Jews have in common is to find and apply the divinely intended spirit and God-principle behind each and every one of the Laws of Moses. And that is because even when there was a Temple and Priesthood, as history marched on, as the Jews dispersed far and wide into foreign lands, and as society, and technology, and political situations evolved, obeying the letter of the Law of Moses at times was possible only within a limited Jewish cultural setting. But once someone moved away from it or that cultural setting changed there had to be adjustments in exactly how to observe some of the laws. For instance: it was always known among the Hebrew sages that the commandment for Israelite males not to shave off their sideburns (Leviticus 19:27) had primarily to do with shunning a custom that many of the Canaanite males sported in the days of the exodus. It's not that it is somehow inherently evil for men not to have sideburns. It's that the Canaanite males were wicked and deserving of destruction in God's eyes, and one standard way that they created an identity as Canaanites was this unique custom of having no sideburns. Therefore the Lord insisted that the Hebrew males were not to do the same because He wanted no visible connection between His people and the Canaanites. But in our day the Canaanites have evolved and dissipated, and so the issue of identity according to sideburns is long past. So if we are to observe the spirit of the sideburns law (the divine intent of the law), then simply having or not having sideburns is no longer the distinctive feature to separate a follower of God from a follower of other gods.

Another example, but one of an entirely different nature, might be how we should observe the Law of the Sabbath Year that has gained the traditional Jewish title of **Shemittah** (and beginning late in September of this year, 2014, it is a **Shemittah** year). **Shemittah** means "the release". Biblically this is the 7<sup>th</sup> year of a 7 year cycle of years. It is to operate just like a week does: 6 days (or 6 years) are regular work days or years, but the 7<sup>th</sup> day (or 7<sup>th</sup> year) is a Sabbath and we are to cease from our labors. The Sabbath year is not so much a rest for humans but rather is a rest for the land. Obviously if the land is resting a farmer is not sowing and tilling and harvesting, so then he also isn't laboring, but that is sort of a byproduct as opposed to the point of the Law.

<sup>CJB</sup> **Leviticus 25:1 ADONAI spoke to Moshe on Mount Sinai; he said,**

<sup>2</sup> **"Tell the people of Isra'el, 'When you enter the land I am giving you, the land itself is to observe a Shabbat rest for ADONAI.**

<sup>3</sup> **Six years you will sow your field; six years you will prune your grapevines and gather their produce.**

<sup>4</sup> **But in the seventh year is to be a Shabbat of complete rest for the land, a Shabbat for ADONAI; you will neither sow your field nor prune your grapevines.**

Now, how in the Western world, or almost anywhere for that matter, are we to stop all growing of field crops, vineyards and orchards for an entire year? And I'm talking about the SAME year worldwide. The commandment seems clear to me (and to the Jewish scholars, sages and Rabbis) that it applies NOT to the whole earth but only to the land of Israel. Why only there? Because the commandment directly says so (When you enter the land I'm giving to you..."). Yet, no doubt, from a spiritual perspective as the Kingdom of God spreads then so should the Laws of God spread with it. There is a principle at play here and it is that both the land and human beings who live on it are to be given a period of rest based on the formula of 1 in 7. It is a God-principle based on Creation itself for God created land and He created life and the land is needed to support life thus they both have importance to Him.

For a human our rest is one day in 7, and for land its rest is 1 year in 7. I have been asked a number of times recently should Believers observe **Shemittah**, the Sabbath year? And my answer is: probably only if you are in Israel because while most of the 613 laws apply both inside and outside of Israel, a few can realistically only apply within Israel, and **Shemittah** might be one of them.

Further let me point out that it is Jewish Tradition that has named the Sabbatical Year **Shemittah**; we don't find that title for the Sabbath year in the Law of Moses. In fact the term **shemittah** is actually only applied to a certain aspect of the Jubilee year, which is the culmination of seven 7-year cycles. And in that context **shemittah** (release) was only referring to bond servants that were to be given their freedom, those in debt that were to have their debts forgiven, and those who had lost their land and were to have it returned to them by the

current land holder. Again, this release was to occur only on the Jubilee year (every 50<sup>th</sup> year). When and why Rabbis borrowed the act of release (***shemittah***) from the Jubilee ordinance and applied it to the Sabbath year ordinance I don't know. And, by the way, there is no Biblical record of a Jubilee year ever being observed and the Rabbis know of none. And the Jubilee year is not currently observed by Judaism (although it is given recognition when a Jubilee year arrives even if none of its requirements are carried out).

And let's not forget that Deuteronomy slightly modified the ways how some of the Laws of Moses were observed because when first given in Exodus, Leviticus and Numbers the Israelites were desert wanderers. But when they entered Canaan their living circumstances would change drastically and they would live in houses and cities, and farm fields and orchards to grow food. In other words there were things they could do once settled in Canaan that they couldn't do as wanderers; and there were things they had to do as wanderers that simply no longer applied as permanent residents of towns and villages.

But here's the kicker: while in some instances details of how a Law was, or could be observed might change due to changing circumstances, the morality behind the law, and the principle that spawned each and every law was never to be tampered with. Again, how do I know that modern Believers are supposed to obey the law and even if we have to adapt some details of it to our current circumstances we're not to tamper with its principles and morality? Our Messiah told us so.

### **Mathew 5:17-19 CJB**

***<sup>17</sup> "Don't think that I have come to abolish the Torah or the Prophets. I have come not to abolish but to complete.***

***<sup>18</sup> Yes indeed! I tell you that until heaven and earth pass away, not so much as a yud or a stroke will pass from the Torah- not until everything that must happen has happened.***

***<sup>19</sup> So whoever disobeys the least of these mitzvot and teaches others to do so will be called the least in the Kingdom of Heaven. But whoever obeys them and so teaches will***

***be called great in the Kingdom of Heaven.***

Society and circumstances were very different for Ezra than they were 130 years earlier when Judah was led away captive to Babylon. But the Torah-based morality and principle of honoring no other gods, and of God's worshippers not marrying pagans, and of no divorce except due to unfaithfulness, and of following God's Word as opposed to the latest conglomeration of rules and customs invented by the religious leaders, was no different when Ezra arrived than when Nebuchadnezzar burned the 1<sup>st</sup> Temple to the ground. However precisely HOW to do some of these laws was necessarily different.

So next week we'll continue to look at Ezra and his response to the new circumstances that Judah lived under, and his remedy for the illicit marriages by Hebrews to foreign pagans.